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SUBJECT: TURKISH YOUTH: ATTITUDES TOWARD THE U.S., EU, AND
TURKEY'S WORLD ROLE

REF: (A) ANKARA 3652 (B) ANKARA 3651

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THIS IS THE THIRD IN A SERIES OF THREE CABLES ABOUT TURKISH
YOUTH COMPILED BY FIRST- AND SECOND-TOUR OFFICERS THROUGHOUT
MISSION TURKEY.

11. (SBU) Summary: Accounting for an overwhelming majority of
the population, the under-35 cohort will play a major role in
shaping Turkey's political future. We met with young people
from throughout Turkey to gauge their opinions on the United
States, Turkey's bid to join the European Union, and Turkey's
role in the Middle East. Turkish youth view the U.S. in much
the same way as the rest of the Turkish public. Overall, our
outreach has found that young Turks are divided on the topic
of EU membership but support an activist role for Turkey in
the Middle East. Youth opinions of the U.S. are increasingly
unfavorable. End Summary.

Youth Anti-Americanism on the Increase

12. (SBU) According to an April 2006 Infakto opinion poll,
Turkish youth have a slightly more "positive opinion about
Americans" than Turkish citizens at large (53% vs. 47%).
When asked, however, whether they have a "positive opinion
about the U.S.," these numbers fall to 29% for youth, and 28%
for voters at large. This reflects a more positive attitude
toward Americans as people than toward U.S. government policy.

13. (SBU) Both Infakto polling and our own interactions with
Turkish youth suggest that those who have been to the U.S.
criticize the country and its politics, but have warm
feelings for Americans themselves. Those who have not been
to the U.S. perceive the country negatively, and also have
misgivings, though to a lesser extent, about its people. We
found that the line most repeated in meetings and casual
encounters alike is, "we really like Americans, but we don't
like the American government." This disjuncture between how
youth perceive the U.S. as a country, and how they perceive
U.S. citizens as people, constantly resurfaced in our
meetings with youth in both Istanbul and Ankara, and tracks
with Turkish public opinion overall.

14. (SBU) These negative views are not only found in large
cities. An English Language Fellow (ELF) working in the
Black Sea city of Trabzon told us that ten years ago, her
students equated America with "Hollywood," "freedom," "a
place full of opportunity," and "a place to make dreams come

true." Today, however, their view of America has shifted, bringing to mind "war," "death," "racial profiling," "oppressive government," and "lack of religious freedom." An ELF working in the Central Anatolian city of Eskisehir told us that her students, who have actually interacted with Americans, had favorable opinions, but also believed there were "bad" Americans.

¶15. (SBU) This poor perception of the U.S. as a country is a reflection of young Turks, generally pessimistic assessment of current and future relations between the U.S. and Turkey. 85% believe that "relations with the U.S. will worsen," and 81% believe that "the U.S. is unfair towards Turkey." Most disconcertingly, 45% of young Turks believe that "Turkey and the U.S. are gradually going towards a war," versus 40% of voters at large.

¶16. (SBU) Despite these negative views of the U.S. and the bilateral relationship, the ELFs were quick to point out that many of their students hope to pursue educational opportunities in the U.S. Ankara and Istanbul's student visa and student-work-travel applicant numbers confirm this. From January 1, 2006 through May 15, 2006, 5,903 students applied to participate in the student-work-travel program. From June 1, 2005 through June 1, 2006, 3,144 students applied for F-1 visas in Ankara, and 3,975 students applied for J-1 visas in Ankara.

Rooting Out the Cause of Negative Attitudes

¶17. (SBU) When we asked young Turks about the roots of their misgivings about the U.S., the overwhelming majority pointed to the war in Iraq. The ELF in Eskisehir noted that her students placed the blame for the Iraq war entirely on the

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U.S., never mentioning Saddam or the other coalition forces involved. Members of the executive board of the Anatolian Young Leaders, a political movement with over 4,000 members spread throughout Turkey, suggested to us that long-standing hostility to the war has been reinforced by several factors, including the Turkish movie, "Valley of the Wolves," which depicts atrocious behavior by the U.S. military in Iraq; the Abu Graib prisoner-abuse scandal; the incident in Suleymaniye where U.S. soldiers placed hoods over Turkish soldiers, heads; and finally, a sense that the U.S. does not do enough to curtail the PKK in northern Iraq.

¶18. (SBU) On the flip side, one factor that had led to positive feelings about the U.S. in the past - the 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, widely attributed to the U.S. - has largely faded. While some youth are aware of other areas of cooperation, including U.S. support for Turkey's EU membership, U.S. military and economic assistance, and U.S. support after the 1999 Kocaeli earthquake, these have not been sufficient to offset the negatives stemming from Iraq.

¶19. (SBU) According to the Infakto poll, young Turks, opinions on these issues generally do not diverge significantly from the opinion of voters at large, with two exceptions. First, only 20% of young Turks see Turkey's military role in NATO as helping relations, in contrast to 25% of voters at large. Second, 40% of young Turks see U.S. support for EU accession as significant, in contrast to only 33% of voters at large. EU accession is therefore one of the principal differences in foreign policy views between different age groups within Turkey, and deserves particular attention.

EU Accession: Shifting Goal Posts

¶10. (SBU) In general, we found that Turkish youth are more enthusiastic about EU membership than Turkish voters at large. According to the Infakto poll, Turkish youth are more likely than Turkish voters to favor full membership, are more likely to believe that membership will bring personal advantages, and are more likely to describe EU membership as "something good." Many of the young Turks we met with were quick to point out that, even if Turkey does not achieve full membership, the country will still benefit from the EU-mandated reform package now underway. As one Istanbul student put it, "the EU is a tool for development, and Turkey will benefit even if it does not become a member."

¶11. (SBU) Despite positive feelings about possible benefits of EU reforms, Turkish youth also fear that EU membership would mean losing part of their country's tradition and culture. Several students in Istanbul and the southwestern city of Mugla expressed frustration over the EU process, saying that they felt that Europeans would not accept Muslims and that EU members feared that too many Turks would move to their countries. Youth suspicion of the EU also may arise from a sense that the EU has been moving the goal posts of accession in its negotiations with Turkey. One member of the Anatolian Young Leaders commented that "the EU is not sincere, and is adding requirements like solving Cyprus to the Copenhagen criteria." Youth have been one of the key support blocks within Turkish society for EU membership. If its most vocal supporters lose enthusiasm, this could erode the national conviction sustaining what will be a lengthy process.

Turkey's Geopolitical Role

¶12. (SBU) Turkish youth also express the belief that Turkey can play an important role in advancing the democratic agenda in the Middle East. In this vein, young Turks proudly talk about Turkey's co-leadership (with Spain) of the U.N.-initiated "Alliance of Civilizations." They see this initiative as acknowledging the central regional and geo-political role that Turkey can play as a bridge-building gateway between the east and the west.

Comment

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¶13. (SBU) With deep-rooted public hostility to the Iraq war, we face an uphill public relations challenge with Turkish youth, as with other parts of the population. As one woman in her early twenties put it in conversation, "in two years, we have lost the trust between Turkey and the U.S. that was accumulated over many years." Finding the tools to reverse this trend and stress the broad scope of the U.S.-Turkey relationship remains the mission's priority. It is likely, however, that only stability in Iraq and addressing the issue of the PKK presence there will bring the sea change in attitudes we seek.

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